

The Need for a Web-based Continuing Education Program

EWS 2005

Subject Area Professional Military Education (PME)

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Conference Group 1 Capt Bossie

Currently in the Marine Corps, infantry officers attend the Infantry Officer Course (IOC) for approximately ninety days and then are unleashed to the Fleet Marine Force to conduct the infantry operations, which they have just learned. For two to three years, they continue to hone their skills (given the proper guidance and initiative) as platoon commanders and executive officers and then they are sent to a B-billet (non-MOS billet). For most that means learning a new job which most likely has nothing to do with the infantry skills they have spent three years practicing. A lucky few remain in the infantry mindset as platoon commanders for FAST Co, or instructors at The Basic School (TBS) or IOC. The majority, however does not have such good fortune and does not experience the infantry mindset again until they return to Expeditionary Warfare School or the Fleet Marine Force as a company commander. By then it is too late to try to get caught up on current tactics, techniques and procedures, or other company commander issues. The EWS non-resident program is supposed to prepare them for such challenges, but as anyone who has completed it will attest, the program falls far

short of achieving that goal. Thus, the Marine Corps is not fully utilizing company commanders by not giving them all assets required to educate themselves before taking command. To combat this, the Marine Corps must institute a web-based continuing education program for officers working outside the infantry military occupational specialty (0302) in order to keep their tactics, techniques and procedures current. This program must be updated to provide future company commanders with current knowledge that will help them to be successful.

B-Billets and the Infantry Officer:

As an infantry officer leaving the operating forces after two or three years, one is required to complete a b-billet. As stated before, some are infantry related, but many are not. For example, an infantry officer who is sent to recruiting duty or a joint command billet will not encounter infantry training for at least three years. During that time he will learn the nuances of his new billet and spend ten to sixteen hours a day perfecting his new skill set, in many cases six days per week. During this time, he has two options. He can complete EWS non-resident program (on his one or two days off) or he can submit a package for resident EWS. Regardless of which

path he chooses, he has spent the last three years out of the combat decision-making mindset. Even if he utilized his extra time to study on his B-billet, the only materials currently available to him are IOC publications and whatever else he can glean from various sources. It is highly probable that these IOC publications or various other sources do not address current TTPs or company command issues with which future company commanders are concerned.

Why do we need a common center of education?

Entrusting the lives of 150 Marines to a Marine Captain is a large part of it. Not sending a Company Commander to the fleet to lead Marines into combat without having made a tactical decision in three years is much like pulling a pilot from his airframe for three years and then sticking him back in the cockpit without giving him any refresher training or qualifications. Both instances place lives in danger and not giving infantry company commanders a tool to keep their skills sharp is, at the very least illogical.

In his April 1998 Marine Corps Gazette article, then-Captain B. B. McBreen stated that "A leader is practicing his profession if he makes a hundred tactical decisions

during nine months of school. For mastery however, he needs the experience of a thousand tactical decisions.¹ He based this information on a Harvard Business School template, which poses students with 240 business decision making problems in one year.² Marine officers on B-billets should have a tool at their disposal to keep their tactical mind sharp. Tactical decision-making is a perishable skill which needs to be routinely practiced to maintain.

Tactical Decision Games (TDGs) are an excellent way to exercise the mind in such a manner however, the one TDG per month that the Gazette publishes is hardly enough to stimulate one's decision making abilities. Plus the TDGs are published on the internet by the Gazette date back many years. Although they are excellent resources, there should be other options to make it easier for a company commander to get pertinent information. A controlled access website with tactical decision games, tactics, techniques and procedures; and other current issues would be extremely beneficial. One web site for Marine Corps company commanders could house all of the above tools, which will greatly improve the knowledge base, skill level, and

¹ Brendan B. McBreen, "I Want to be 'Ender'!" Marine Corps Gazette, April 1998.

² Brendan B. McBreen, "I Want to be 'Ender'!" Marine Corps Gazette, April 1998.

experience level of all future and current infantry company commanders.

Current Schooling requirements:

Currently there is no course that prepares a captain for company command (with the exception of OFEC at EWS). EWS is a requirement for promotion to Major, not for command. IOC perhaps prepares an officer for company command if he were to progress from platoon commander to executive officer to company commander without spending any time out of the infantry. However all officers are required to do a B-Billet so that plan loses its luster quickly. Therefore it is feasible that an officer could return to company command with only the tools he learned six years prior at IOC as his "current" education. The Marine Corps should do more to set each commander up for success.

The EWS resident program is an excellent course of study which prepares officers for MAGTF operations as well as preparing infantry officers with eight weeks of infantry-specific (OFEC) training. However, this program is limited to little more than two hundred officers per year, with only approximately sixty infantry officers. Therefore those sixty infantry officers get great training in MAGTF operations as well as training in company command

issues, tactics, and current TTPs. Establishing a web-site would allow all other infantry officers a chance to obtain more of the infantry company current information as well as giving all infantry officers many tools at their disposal.

Without some sort of web based, infantry specific program, many infantry officers are not getting a good "data dump" on current TTPs. Given all of the information coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan in the form of After Action reports and current Tactics, Techniques and Procedures, the Marine Corps should be capturing all of these and producing them for all future company commanders. This website should offer first-hand reports from those who choose to submit after action reports or any other type of correspondence.

Existing web sites

Disseminating information to those who need it is not a new, unique or ingenious concept. One could argue that this type of information dissemination has been around since World War II. After Guadalcanal, the Army began publishing the insights of soldiers in booklets called "The Mailing List."³ The system was inefficient and often lacked

³ Dan Baum, "Battle Lessons," The New Yorker, 17 January 2005, 44.

quality, but it was the beginning of what is currently being used by the army for information dissemination.

The Army utilizes its Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) in real world experiences from Afghanistan to Iraq publishing after action reviews in binders and booklets for its soldiers.⁴ Such information is excellent for those in country, but does not help the future commander.

Currently there are a few web sites which have somewhat relative information but none of which are specific to the Marine Corps infantry company commander. While they all provide excellent information, they have shortfalls in that they either are too general for Marine Corps infantry company command or they do not apply to the Marine Corps ethos.

For example, the website www.2ndBn5thMar.com offers excellent infantry information for all levels of infantrymen. Information pertinent to squad leaders, combat orders, night training, and tank/infantry integration is included on the web site. The website also provides tactical decision games as well as links to other TTPs which are a vital part of what any infantry website should contain.⁵ However, since it is essentially a hodge-

⁴ Dan Baum, "Battle Lessons" The New Yorker, 17 Jan 2005, 44.

⁵ Infantry Training Website, 1 January, 2005, <www.2ndbn5thmar.com>

podge of information catering to all infantrymen, it does not address issues that company commanders may need to address. The web site is not an official military website and therefore is only updated when volunteers can take the time to input new data onto the website. While it can be a great augment in a company commander's toolkit, it still falls short of what is needed.

The Army has produced a web site called www.companycommander.com. The Marine Corps should use this website as a model. www.companycommander.com is actually a "conversation" in company command issues. Although the website is meant for army officers and is not infantry specific, much of what it covers is infantry related. The information it provides very good and very relevant data to future, current and post company commanders. It is governed by a password and therefore provides chat rooms and a real-time list of who is currently logged on, which facilitates "conversation" in company command issues, TTPs and current issues. The web site is driven by articles and stories submitted by current commanders which tend to make it cluttered and less based in doctrine, but the website also allows current TTPs to be readily passed on and posted for mass consumption. The website provides a medium for

first hand accounts of current operations to be passed on to future company commanders.⁶

The Army has evidently discovered an efficient way to promulgate information through the internet. They offer web sites for not only company commanders but platoon commanders as well. What these sites lack in TDG-type information, they make up in first-person accounts of the latest actions/experiences from around the world.

Solution

In order to keep future and current company commanders "in the loop," the proposed web site must offer a myriad of services from tactical decision games to tactics, techniques and procedures, to after action reports, as well as links to other sites with pertinent information such as doctrinal web sites. At a minimum the website should include:

- tactical decision games (or a link to the Gazette, at a minimum)
- current after action reports from Iraq and Afghanistan

⁶ "Company Command, building combat-ready teams," 1 January 2005.
<www.companycommand.army.mil>

- current tactics, techniques and procedures from Iraq and Afghanistan

- Links to doctrinal publications

The website should be updated in real time and should provide the capacity of posting and retrieving messages to allow first hand experiences to be posted for the masses.

Conclusion

To facilitate the promulgation of information to future company commanders, the Marine Corps needs to establish a website which will provide information specific to Marine Corps infantry captains. Not only will this serve as a educational tool to keep officers' decision-making minds sharp, but it will also allow current first-hand experiences to be passed to those who are about to take Marines into combat.